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RICHARD WATSON GILDER.

BY BRANDER MATTHEWS.

IN spite of our insistent habit of praising the past at the expense of the present, no student of social conditions could fairly deny that the level of life here in New York is in many ways higher than it was thirty or forty years ago. There is a keener sense of social responsibility and an acuter analysis of social demands. Above all, there is a more widely dispersed acceptance of the solidarity of the several classes of the community and a sharper recognition of their obligations to one another. At times the spirit of our citizens may seem wantonly careless and negligently tolerant of evil; yet we are capable of waking up to the needs of the moment and we reveal ourselves ready to make the best of an unexpected opportunity. At bottom we have a hearty contempt for the so-called "society leaders" who render no social service,—except perhaps that of setting a horrible example of wasteful idleness and of splurging incapacity. We are willing enough to recognize our debt to the true leaders who have ungrudgingly taken upon themselves the burden of doing the things that need to be done.

No city in the world has a group of institutions devoted to the advancement of learning and to the progress of civilization superior to the group to be found here in New York, all of them administered cautiously yet boldly by a little company of public-spirited men who are rendering an unpaid service to the community, the value of which cannot be estimated in money. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, the American Museum of Natural History, the Zoologic Park, the Botanic Garden, the Public Library, Columbia University and the more important hospitals, are institutions of which any metropolis might well be proud. Each of them is governed by a board of trustees; and

a comparison of the list of these several bodies will bring out the frequency with which certain names recur,—the names of the men who are doing things that are worth while and who are getting those things done.

On the continent of Europe this work would probably be in charge of government officials; but here in America it has been undertaken by private citizens. It is our Anglo-Saxon habit to rely on individual initiative to accomplish much which elsewhere would be relegated to the State. We are ready enough to support the government, but we do not expect the government to support us or to support all the institutions which we believe to be necessary. We rely on self-constituted bodies to take charge of many interests of the highest importance; and these self-constituted bodies can come into being and can accomplish their purpose only when the community possesses men of lofty idealism, who are willing to labor unceasingly for the public good, with no hope of any other reward than the esteem of their fellow citizens. In the fact that New York has its full share of men of this self-sacrificing type we can find the answer to the question Lowell asked more than half a century ago: "In proportion as a man grows commercial, does he become dispassionate and incapable of electric emotion?"

President Eliot has pointed out the fallacy in the assertion that "the educated classes become impotent in a democracy, because the representatives of those classes are not chosen to public office," since in the United States public office is not the position of greatest influence. "Political leaders are very seldom the leaders of thought; they are generally trying to induce masses of men to act on principles thought out long before"; and "the real leaders of American thought have been preachers, teachers, jurists, seers and poets."

Richard Watson Gilder was a poet who was also a seer, a teacher and a leader. He was the living disproof of the belief that a poet must be a weakling, shrinking from contact with the rude world and ready to retire into an ivory tower, far from the madding crowd's ignoble strife. But Milton was no skulker and Dante led a strenuous life. Sophocles fought at Salamis, Horace had seen service in the field, and Cervantes was wounded at Lepanto. In spite of a frail frame Gilder went to the front in the dark days of Gettysburg; and he did not wear the red

ribbon of the Legion of Honor with more pride than the bronze button of the Grand Army of the Republic. And he was a volunteer in many good causes, enlisting again and again in that civic warfare, the campaigns of which are longer and more disheartening than any military operations. In this civic warfare he found a desperate joy; and when he entered on one of these recurrent struggles he was no ninety-day recruit, but a seasoned veteran, who had enlisted "for three years or the war."

His poems were garnered in a single volume only a few months before his untimely death. In their transparent simplicity they disclose the character of the man who wrote them,—tender, aspiring and loyal. They display a delicate sensitiveness of feeling; they have a free spontaneity truly expressive of the man who sang them into being. They voice a genuine lyric cry; they have a fine distinction; they are the work of a true poet, even if they do not prove beyond question that he was also a great poet. They reveal his open-mindedness on every side to the influence of art in all its several manifestations, painting and sculpture, architecture and music,—more especially music. At times they make plain his manly capacity for indignation when his scorn of hypocrisy burned hot within him. In his lyrics we find no dreamy aloofness from life, even though he might disclose his kinship with Keats and with Shelley in his occasional detachment from material things. One aspect of his poetic power is evident in his scorching satire on the pretenders who mask with piety their disregard for the common decencies of life; and another aspect is visible in the lovely sonnet, "Call me not dead":

"Call me not dead when I, indeed, have gone
 Into the company of the everliving
 High and most glorious poets! Let thanksgiving
 Rather be made. Say: 'He at last hath won
 Rest and release, converse supreme and wise
 Music and song and light of immortal faces;
 To-day, perhaps, wandering in starry places,
 He hath met Keats, and known him by his eyes,
 To-morrow (who can say?) Shakespeare may pass,
 And our lost friend just catch one syllable
 Of that three-centuried wit that kept so well;
 Or Milton, or Dante, looking on the grass,
 Thinking of Beatrice, and listening still
 To chanted hymns that sound from the heavenly hill.'"

Much as I appreciate these loftier poems of his with their lyric lift and their delicate purity of sentiment, I confess a keener liking for the poems in which he set forth his love for New York and in which he caught and fixed one or another of its shifting appearances,—the sonnet on “Longfellow’s ‘Book of Sonnets,’” in which he echoed the chimes of Grace Church on a Sunday evening when there was

“not a trace
of Saturday’s harsh turmoil in the town;—”

the song of “The City” wherein he declared that

“To me no music is half so sweet
As the thunder of Broadway;”

the vigorous hexameter of “In the Cities,” with its unstinted tribute to the daring of the men of the fire department;—the sequence of couplets in which he set forth the charm of “Washington Square”; and, above all, the superb and resonant stanzas on the burial of General Sherman:

“Glory and honor and fame; the pomp that a soldier prizes;
The league-long waving line as the marching falls and rises;
Rumbling of caissons and guns; the clatter of horses’ feet,
And a million awe-struck faces all down the waiting street.”

He had also the true poet’s mastery of prose, as he proved long ago in the uncollected contributions which he called the “Old Cabinet,” a series of little essays exquisite in their tenderness of feeling, full of flavor and mellow in tone, like opals that have been warmed in the hand. The only prose work of his which he cared to put forth in a book by itself and to warrant with his name, contained several papers on Lincoln, solid in structure and rich in texture. No one had a keener appreciation of Lincoln than Gilder; and no one had a more ardent admiration for the foremost of our nineteenth-century presidents. In the pages of this little volume, his understanding of the martyred leader of the nation through the troublous times of the Civil War, his sympathetic insight into the character of Lincoln the man, is not keener than his felicitous discrimination of the merits of Lincoln the author, of the marvellous stylist who was able to achieve the noble simplicity of the Gettysburg address.

As an editor Gilder won for himself a place in the front rank;

and it would be difficult to overestimate the importance of the influence he exerted upon the development of the modern magazine. Editing a periodical review of life and literature may seem easy, but it is a difficult art in which only a few have excelled. Editors are like poets in that they are born, not made; and Gilder was gifted by birth with the needful faculty. Editing is a calling for which there are no training-schools; and Gilder fitted himself for the arduous task as best he could, constantly refreshing himself by communion with the masters of old, whereby he was able to achieve a wider perspective of the present. He lived on a lofty level; but he kept a firm grasp on the realities of life. Intellectually an aristocrat, as Emerson was also, and as a poet is likely to be, he was democratic as Walt Whitman in his sympathy with his fellow man. His belief in the plain people, in their honesty of purpose, in their desire for enlightenment, and in their ultimate sagacity, was as solidly rooted as Franklin's or Jefferson's or Lincoln's.

And it was this belief which sustained him in his editorial labors and which made these labors successful. He was never condescending or patronizing to the readers of his magazine. He never affected to be stooping down to their lower plane. He felt assured of their willingness to respond to any appeal he might make to them, however exalted. I can recall now my telling him once that what distinguished him as an editor from the conductor of a certain other magazine was due to the fact that his friendly rival held the American people to be so intelligent that whatever was popular with them was likely to be pretty good, whereas he felt an even higher regard for his readers, being firmly convinced that whatever was truly good was certain to be popular also. This conviction—that nothing was too good for the average citizen—he always acted on, to the advantage of his own readers and to the encouragement of all his worthy competitors.

With the many contributors to his magazine and with his associates in its conduct, he was ever on the best of terms. He was unfailingly courteous and kindly, considerate and encouraging. He had a keen eye to discover unexpected merit, and he extended a warm welcome to the timid newcomers in the field of letters. His immediate recognition of good work was always genial and hearty. There was never any hint of affecta-

tion in his manner, no suggestion of self-conscious superiority; and this was probably because he was himself richly dowered with the precious gift of personal humility. He was never in danger of taking himself too seriously, or of overvaluing what he was able to accomplish. He met all men on the high table-land of human equality. He wanted the best—in men as in books; and the best men wanted him.

He had a special gift for friendship; and many men of many minds found in him a kindred soul. He was as close to President Cleveland as he was to President Roosevelt; and he was as intimate with Mr. John Burroughs as with Joseph Jefferson,—and all four of them were men like himself in their large sincerity and in their frank honesty. He kept his mind and his heart open on all sides; and he found his friends in many callings, in public life as well as in the several arts. If he was unduly fastidious in anything, it was in the choice of his intimates. He did not willingly fellowship with pretenders, either in politics or in poetry. To be admitted into his friendship was a testimonial to character.

When a lyric poet of abundant productivity happens also to be the editor in chief of a widely circulated monthly magazine, it might seem that his life was full enough of responsibilities, and that he need feel under no obligation to take on any other work. But Gilder was not only a good poet and a good editor, he was also a good citizen, with a deep feeling of responsibility and an abiding sense of the manifold duties of citizenship. He stood ready always to bear his share—and often more than his share—of the burden and heat of the day. A good cause could count on his unfailing support; and he was as willing to serve in the ranks as he was to take a staff appointment. The record of his public activities is as extended as it is noteworthy. It was in his home that the Art Student's League and the Society of American Artists came into being. It was in his house that the Authors Club was founded; and it was due in a measure to the solidarity of the men of letters of New York and of the United States, brought about by the founding of the Authors Club, that the American Copyright League was able to organize itself for the long struggle which resulted in the beneficent copyright bill which became law now nearly a score of years ago. He was an original member of the National Institute of

Arts and Letters; and he had early received the honor of election to the American Academy of Arts and Letters which has been established by the National Institute to contain the leaders of the several arts. He accepted election to the Simplified Spelling Board, in the hope and expectation of fitting English for wider service as a world-language and of helping to bring about the world-peace which would result from a better understanding between the races speaking different tongues. He was an ardent advocate of civil service reform; and he was an earnest supporter of the free kindergarten movement which has done so much to brighten the lives of the children and to supply them with finer social ideals.

But it is with the earlier serious effort to better the conditions of life among the lowly here in the city of New York that his name is most firmly linked. He served as the Chairman of the first Tenement-house Commission. In the conduct of its investigations he was as diligent as he was intelligent. He listened calmly and he questioned acutely; he let all the friends and all the foes of improvement say everything that could be said in support of their assertions. He brought together a mass of evidence which made it plain to all men that the existing conditions were intolerable; and he then extracted the meaning of this testimony in a report which was as temperate as it was convincing, for he had a very shrewd understanding of the art of persuasion and of the best way to accomplish things in this busy world. After the conclusion of the labor of Gilder's commission there was no possible doubt that immediate action was necessary to remedy the hideous evils then made visible to all who were willing to look facts in the face.

The bill in which his recommendations were embodied was far less drastic than had been dreaded by the opponents of this necessary reform; and this unexpected moderation attenuated the violence of the immediate opposition. It strengthened the pressure for making a beginning at once; and it became law. It was the entering wedge of a long-needed amelioration,—a wedge which has been driven in further and further by subsequent legislation, all of it in accord with the suggestions of the original commission. We can see now that it was characteristic of Gilder to be satisfied to ask at first for only a little of what he knew to be needed. With the shrewd optimism which was the result of

his understanding of his fellow Americans he felt sure that what was not given immediately would be granted in a little while after the earliest advance had justified itself. It was largely because he did not demand too much at first that he was enabled to obtain at last more than he had expected. His success in laying the solid foundation for future improvement was due not only to his tact and to his self-restraint, but also to his confidence in his fellow citizens. It is to be ascribed largely to his ingrained belief that every true reform is inevitable, since when it is once started it is certain to roll forward like a snowball gathering mass by its own motion.

"The inveterate independent," so President Butler has declared, in his suggestive and stimulating discussion of "True and False Democracy," "does a public service so long as his independence is certainly based on principle and is without suspicion of personal feeling. He must, however, resign himself to being effective only through criticism, and at the risk of the critical habit becoming censoriousness and querulousness." Perhaps Gilder was not an inveterate independent of this type,—although he did his own thinking always and kept free from the fetich worship of party symbols. Certainly his criticism never became censorious or querulous. It was saved from this by his essential optimism, by the depth and breadth of his belief in our common humanity, by his fundamental democracy. But it was aided, in this escape from the fate which has befallen the old age of not a few critics of our institutions, both native and imported, by the fact that his critical independence was not merely theoretical. It was practical always, as befitted the independence of one who was ever ready himself to man the ramps.

Gilder had none of the haughtiness and of the impatience displayed by only too many of the reformers who have enlisted only for a single fight. He had been a soldier in many a good cause, each in its turn; and he was thus preserved from narrowness and he was saved from the expectation that everything ought to be done in a hurry, exactly as he wanted it done. It is well for a man to have the courage of his convictions; but sometimes it is better for him to have the convictions of his courage and to believe because he dares.

Gilder hitched his wagon to a star,—but, first of all, he made

sure that it was not a falling star. And he did not shrink from standing up in the wagon to say what he believed so that all could hear it. In other words, he took part in the cart-tail speaking on street corners in more than one municipal campaign. He was not the most effective of speakers; he had not mastered the technic of oratory as he had mastered the technic of poetry; yet he was able to win votes because his hearers could not fail to feel his manly sincerity and his honesty of purpose. Probably this sort of public appearance was distasteful to him, but he did not hesitate to lay aside his own feelings when he had once heard the call of duty.

And here he showed his practical good sense and his real superiority to those merely theoretic critics who content themselves with declaring what others ought not to do. In the calm quiet of an editorial office it is easy enough to urge reform impersonally, and many there are who content themselves with this task as easy as it is pleasant. Gilder was not one of these æsthetic dilettants of social and political improvement; he did not shrink from the field-work of enlightenment; he was willing, if need be, to pay with his own person. And no doubt this was one reason, as I have suggested, why he entirely escaped that jaundiced vision of mankind which is only too likely to blind the eyes of the purely theoretic performer soon after he begins to decline into the autumn of life, and which has led more than one of these disappointed idealists almost to regret that he could not live to behold the ultimate accomplishment of his prophecies of evil.

Gilder set an abiding example of civic fidelity. He stood for the best always,—in art, in literature and in life. He set high standards for himself as well as for others. There was no selfishness in his altruism, no unworthy self-seeking, no demand for approbation. He did only what he thought it his duty to do; and he found his reward in the memory of the deed itself. He had a large generosity of mind. He was free from pedantry and from priggishness; and he never assumed an attitude of affected superiority. The basis of his character was simplicity and sincerity; he was rooted in loyalty. In all his relations, personal and political, he was unfailingly scrupulous. He was as hopeful as he was helpful. He was an optimist who was also an opportunist, taking the most which could be obtained at the

moment, assured that more would certainly be granted a little later; and he felt this assurance because of his ingrained belief in the desire of most men to do what is right so soon as the right should be revealed to them. He was a poet of distinction and an editor of eminent ability; he was a leader in good causes; but when all is said, the man himself looms larger than his work.

The late Gaston Boissier declared that there were qualities which the Greeks lacked and which the Romans possessed,—“Respect for authority, tenacity of purpose, the faculty of forgetting private feuds in the face of the common enemy, the close union of all citizens for a common purpose.” The English-speaking peoples, with their forthputting energy, their colonizing faculty, their administrative ability, and their hard and resolute common sense, seem to be closer akin to the Romans than to the Greeks. There is all the more reason, therefore, that we should strive to attain as far as we can to the idealism of the Greeks, to that very practical idealism which inspired the men of Marathon. It is by the aid of that idealism only that the British Empire and the American Republic can retain their vitality, preserve themselves from ultimate decay and escape the fate which befell the mighty realm the Romans ruled. Professor Mahaffy has recently declared that the danger he sees “before this generation is that which came across the Roman world insensibly and which resulted in a decadence not arrested until it sank in the night of the dark ages. . . . We, too, with all our science, with our increase of material knowledge, and our restless running to and fro, may sink into an ugly, dark, joyless conglomeration of societies, for whom new discoveries supply new conveniences, but no return to the happiness of a simpler age. . . . Happiness does not lie here, no, nor in motors, nor in turbines, nor in wireless messages across the globe, nor in daily newspapers full of inextricable fact and falsehood.”

From this doom one thing only will save us, the possession of men with elevated ideals, of men who are ruled by the spirit of unselfishness, who will work loyally and unceasingly to realize their ideals and to make their dreams come true. Richard Watson Gilder was a man of this lofty type; and the city of New York is a better place because he lived in it.

BRANDER MATTHEWS.